

# Explore the Past to Understand the Present and Shape the Future

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In Robert Heilbroner's prophetic book, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*, published in 1974, he examined three threats to the survival of humanity that he believed world leaders would have to address in order to avert disaster—nuclear annihilation, overpopulation, and environmental catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the emerging possibilities of nuclear terrorism, the struggle of the community of nations to contend with massive starvation and

major disasters, and frequent revelations on the impact of climate change have become more deeply etched into our consciousness and underscore the prescience of Heilbroner's forecast.

These are worldwide problems, inextricably connecting national interests to global solutions. Will the rising generation be equipped to deal with the world they are inheriting? And what is our responsibility as social studies educators?

We all know that our students need more than the facts. They need a basic understanding of our history—where we came from or how civilizations have evolved and interacted. But they also need to understand why this knowledge is important and how it relates to their present. They need to appreciate how this knowledge is useful as we create the next chapter, the one they will “co-author.” And they need to believe it—that it is their chapter.



Kurdish refugees at a camp near the Iraq-Turkey border await relief supplies from coalition forces in 1991.

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Defense Department, photographed by Phan Hatton.

History doesn't just happen; it is made—made by real people who faced real challenges, who had uncertainty about the future, just as we do today. Author David McCullough has said,

... history is not about the past. If you think about it, no one ever lived in the past.... They lived in the present. The difference is it was their present, not ours. They were caught up in the living moment exactly as we are, and with no more certainty of how things would turn out than we have.<sup>2</sup>

Astute social studies teachers move with ease between past and present; it is their stock-in-trade. We want students to understand what it was like to live at critical moments in history, to feel the moment as those living it did. We also want them to understand that history can be an important instrument that informs our approach to critical issues today.

Just as McCullough reminds us that history is made in the present, it is also important to remember that when history is made it becomes a piece of our world, a factor in our future decisions. In September 2002, media coverage had

increased public awareness of brewing policy regarding U.S. plans in Iraq. By early 2003, the country and the wider world were in turmoil over what approach to take concerning Saddam Hussein. As Washington debated a plan of action, students in more than 4,000 classrooms, guided by their teachers, wrestled with a set of alternative policy options articulated in an online curriculum resource.

If we try to put ourselves back in that moment, it is difficult now to remember that the United States was wrestling with the question of what to do about Saddam Hussein and his alleged weapons of mass

## LESSON PLAN

# The U.S. Role in the World

- What role should the United States play in the world today and in coming years?
- What are the challenges before us?
- What issues are of most concern to us?
- What kind of world do we want in the twenty-first century?

This lesson, excerpted from a longer unit on the subject of U.S. foreign policy, places students in the role of decision-makers as they explore four divergent policy alternatives—"Futures"—and then articulate their own views. It is best done after consideration of one or more current foreign policy issues. Scholars Online video clips also provide a useful introduction to the topic. They are available from the Scholars Online Section of the Choices Program website, [www.choices.edu/scholars](http://www.choices.edu/scholars).

The four Futures are not intended as a menu of choices. Rather, they are framed in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each alternative includes a set of policies on specific issues, an overview of the beliefs that underlie it, some arguments in support of the position, and some of its risks and tradeoffs. Critiques for each Future come from the perspective of supporters of the other Futures.

It is the students' job to sort through the four Futures, think about their own concerns and values, discuss these with their peers, and then frame a "Future 5" that reflects their own views. Finally, students should be given an opportunity to express their own views on future policy direction.

The Futures and accompanying resources are available online from the Teaching with the News section of the Choices Program website, [www.choices.edu/twtn](http://www.choices.edu/twtn).

### DAY I: Preparation and Presentation of the Options

Break your class up into five groups. Assign four of the groups a Future (one for each group). Assign the remaining group the role of the president and his advisors or of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

**Futures Presenters:** Their task will be to review their assigned Future, consider the values that underlie it as well as the tradeoffs involved, and then develop a short presentation to give to the class. This presentation should make the best possible case for this Future.

**Senate Foreign Relations Committee:** Their task will be to review each of the Futures presented in the material and prepare clarifying questions to ask of the "advocates" of each Future after their presentation. The intent is to make sure that the Futures, as they are written, are fully understood prior to deliberation on their merits, risks, and tradeoffs.

### DAY II: Shared Deliberation and Individual Judgment

With the Futures presented and understood, students have a foundation for deliberation on the merits and the tradeoffs of each. Ultimately students will articulate their own views on the approach the United States should take to foreign policy.

### Deliberating on the Futures

Begin your deliberation by asking students to identify the things they like and the things that concern them about each of the Futures presented. Encourage students to listen carefully to each other rather than to try to "win" the argument. The intent of deliberative discourse is to see that all perspectives are heard and considered and that all participants have a place at the table.

### Articulating Their Own Views

After students have deliberated together on the merits and tradeoffs of the Futures presented, have them articulate their own views on the issue by framing their own "Future 5" using the format of the Futures presented.

Finally, students are also encouraged to express their views to elected officials. Students can find contact information for the White House at [www.whitehouse.gov/contact/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/) and for their U.S. senators and representatives at [thomas.loc.gov/](http://thomas.loc.gov/).

destruction and which nations would join with us. Should the United States (1) act alone to remove Saddam Hussein from power and eliminate his weapons of mass destruction; (2) work with the international community to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; (3) reject war—at least now—and continue to contain and deter Saddam Hussein; or (4) reject the use of military force and reduce our foreign policy profile? All were tough choices with real consequences. When the nation went to war with Iraq in March 2003, Washington had made its choice; and with it, a new

chapter in history began to take shape.

As the current war in Iraq deepened, the Choices Program developed a substantive resource to engage students in exploration of the history of Iraq, from its early years to the present. Working with this resource, students acquire a contextualized understanding of Iraqi history and the history of U.S. policy in the region and, in turn, a more complete understanding of the political, social, and cultural forces at play today. Armed with this historical knowledge, students are prepared to deliberate on current policy using a framework of divergent policy

alternatives that we as Americans are facing. These “options” are framed in stark terms, complete with competing policy proposals, risks, and trade-offs.<sup>3</sup> These could also be understood as “futures”—alternative images of a moment in the future arrived at through competing approaches to the current challenge.

Evaluating the significance of theoretical choices is precarious, but necessary, if students are to learn how to conceptualize the future and participate in decisions in the present. If our students are to become competent analysts of world affairs and problem solvers tomorrow, we

## The Futures In Brief

### **Future 1: Lead the World to Democracy**

The United States is the most powerful nation in the world. The world depends on us to maintain peace and order and to support liberal democratic principles. We must devote the necessary resources to build an international moral order and a vigorous international economy grounded in American political and economic principles; and we must protect this international system from any threats, even if pressuring other governments to adopt American democratic principles may spark international criticism that the United States is trying to control the world.

### **Future 2: Protect U.S. Global Interests**

We live in a dangerously unstable world. U.S. foreign policy must strive for order and security. We need to focus our energies on protecting our own security, cultivating our key trade relationships, ensuring our access to crucial raw materials, and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to unfriendly nations or to terrorist networks. We must be selective in our involvement in international affairs and be prepared to protect ourselves—at home and abroad—against any threats to our security and prosperity, even if this policy may breed resentment and lead to an angry backlash.

### **Future 3: Build a More Cooperative World**

We live today in an interdependent and interconnected world. We cannot stand alone. National boundaries can no longer halt the spread of AIDS, international drug trafficking, terrorism, and other global scourges. We must take the initiative to bring the nations of the world together and bolster the UN's role in maintaining international security and responding to other global problems, such as environmental pollution, financial crises, and worldwide refugees. We must be willing to cede a portion of our independent authority, or sovereignty, to the UN and offer our military, intelligence, and economic support to UN-led initiatives, even if this may limit our ability to use unilateral military force outside of North America.

### **Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland**

The attacks of September 11, 2001, have made us feel a vulnerability not felt in more than 50 years. We have spent hundreds of billions of dollars a year defending our allies in Western Europe and East Asia and distributed tens of billions more in foreign aid to countries throughout the developing world. These high-profile foreign policy programs have only bred resentment and created new U.S. enemies. It is time to sharply scale back our foreign involvement and turn our attention to the real threats facing Americans—a sagging economy, decaying schools, a shaky healthcare system, and inadequate resources to protect against terrorism—even if this may upset the worldwide balance of power and cause insecure countries to seek nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

**U.S. Army soldiers search a car in Iraq during a joint cordon and search operation, November 15, 2006.**

(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michael Guillory)



must engage them in informed deliberation on the uncertainties of history and the challenges of the present—analysis typically conducted by scholars and policy elites. A Jeffersonian outlook on the responsibility of an informed citizenry would suggest that the public has a key role to play, to set the broad parameters within which policy is made.

If our students are going to be prepared to participate as active citizens shaping the world of tomorrow, they must understand that history didn't just happen, it was made, and that they have a place in making the choices that will become the history of tomorrow. If they are to appreciate fully the dynamic nature of this continuum from past to future, they will need to acquire a variety of intellectual skills. They must be able to:

- Understand multiple perspectives and competing interpretations;
- Grasp the concept of multiple causation;

- Contextualize the past;
- Make connections across time and place;
- Differentiate among fact, opinion, and interpretation;
- Weigh the importance and reliability of evidence and explain its significance;
- Comprehend and use primary sources; and
- Formulate rational conclusions.

The theme of this year's National Council for the Social Studies conference is "Embrace the Future." If we want our students to embrace the future that we are, in fact, constructing together, we must help them understand that we do not study history because it's good for us, we study it because it is also about our future. They will only understand this if they can see the continuum from past to future and view the content we teach

within the context of that continuum. When we at the Choices Program say, "Explore the past—shape the future," it is this very continuum that we have in mind. 🌐

**Notes**

1. Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1974), 150.
2. David McCullough, *The Course of Human Events*, 2003 Jefferson Lecture.
3. To help students appreciate that the choices we make affect the future we are building, the policy "options" considered before the war in Iraq are still available at [www.choices.edu/resources/twtn\\_iraq.php](http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_iraq.php).

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